

## Consensus Building: A Key to School Transformation

By Daniel Baron

**T**here are probably millions of meetings held in schools across the United States every day. How would your staff describe the faculty meetings at your school? My experience suggests that in an overwhelming majority of faculty meetings, participants are disengaged. When I ask teachers to describe their meeting nightmares, they often describe meetings that are dominated by information that could have been shared in a memo or an e-mail; unfocused, unproductive, and dominated by a few voices; irrelevant to teaching and learning; late starting and ending; and characterized by top-down management.

It's no wonder that most teachers enter meetings without enthusiasm or high expectations. One of the most demoralizing aspects of a meeting is that participants often feel that they are asked for input to decisions that have already been made or that their input is ignored when the decision is made.

### Leadership Gifts

In *Leading With Soul* (2005, Jossey-Bass), Bolman and Deal identify authorship, love, power, and significance as the four gifts of leading with soul. The point of their message is that they are not leadership gifts until you give them away to the people you serve. Consensus-based decision making and commonly held group agreements are two processes that you can give to your faculty.

Consensus-based decision making can turn faculty meetings into mean-

ingful and productive work sessions in which faculty members know that their input is respected and valued and important decisions are made.

Reaching consensus has different meanings in different contexts. In my approach, decisions are made *by consensus* when the decision affects the entire group. The group is *in consensus* only when each member of the faculty can live with the recommendation, support its implementation, and agree to not impede the implementation. I use this decision-making model any time an individual, a team, or a committee makes a recommendation to the faculty.

The Tuning Protocol is a good way to begin consensus-based decision making and to revise the recommendation. It's important that the larger group have ownership of a decision before they are asked to agree to it. After the recommendation is explained:

- Faculty members ask clarifying questions to be sure that they fully understand the proposal
- Faculty members give warm (affirming) feedback and cool (any concerns) feedback about the recommendation
- The members of the recommending team listen carefully and explain how they addressed or how they could address a concern.

Before calling for consensus, it is important to review the three conditions that must be met:

1. I can live with the decision (until I'm ready to live the decision)

2. I will support my colleagues in implementing this decision
3. I will do absolutely nothing to impede the implementation of this decision.

Once the conditions are clear to everyone, the facilitator can call for consensus on the recommendation and ask whether there any other questions, comments, or concerns. If no one speaks, the facilitator calls for an affirmation of the consensus.

### Creating Agreements

Consensus-based decision making will not automatically transform how faculty members work together, but there is a fairly easy way to transform the culture of school meetings. At your next faculty meeting, ask your teachers to pair with a colleague and brainstorm everything that they find unproductive about meetings. After five minutes or so, ask each pair to share the one thing they find most frustrating. Using a flip chart, record them as "Things to Avoid at Our Meetings."

After you have charted the responses from each pair, ask the pairs to identify one meeting agreement (similar to a norm but with more accountability) that they think would most help the faculty avoid their most frustrating meeting behavior or procedure.

At the end of the session, ask a small group of teachers and administrators to form a work group to review the proposed agreements at another

## TUNING PROTOCOL FOR CONSENSUS BUILDING

### 1 Introduction (2 minutes)

The facilitator briefly introduces protocol goals, guidelines, and schedule.

### 2. Presentation (3–5 minutes)

The presenter has an opportunity to share the context for the recommendation, focusing question for feedback.

### 3. Clarifying questions (3–5 minutes)

The participants have an opportunity to ask clarifying questions to get information that may have been omitted in the presentation that they feel would help them to understand the recommendation. Clarifying questions are matters of fact.

### 4. Pause to reflect on warm and cool feedback (2–3 minutes)

The participants take a couple of minutes to reflect on what they would like to contribute to the feedback session.

### 5. Warm and cool feedback (10 minutes)

The participants share feedback with one another while the presenter is silent. The feedback generally begins with a few minutes of warm feedback, moves on to a few minutes of cool feedback (sometimes phrased in the form of reflective questions), and then moves back and forth between warm and cool feedback.

Warm feedback may include comments about how the work presented seems to meet the desired goals; cool feedback focuses on what would have to change for the participant to agree with the recommendation. Often participants offer ideas or suggestions for strengthening the work presented. Presenters are silent and take notes.

### 6. Reflection (5 minutes)

The presenters address those comments and questions that could break consensus. This is not a time to defend a position, but a time for the presenters to reflect aloud on the ideas or questions from the group and to suggest revisions for consensus.

### 7. Debrief (3 minutes)

time and synthesize them into a workable set of agreements to propose to the faculty at the next meeting.

At the next faculty meeting, begin by asking the work group to present their recommendations to the rest of the faculty. Using the process described earlier, move staff members through each step until they come to consensus on a set of agreements.

### Encourage Follow Through

Once consensus is reached, the group should determine what steps must be taken to implement the decision, who is going to take them, and by when. It is also important to inform anyone who is not present at the meeting. The facilitator should ask, Who needs to know about this decision, who is going to tell them, and by when? I suggest that a trusted colleague of the absentee member communicate the decision.

In the event that consensus is not achieved, ask those who are not in consensus to meet with the recommending committee to resolve any issues. If true consensus cannot be achieved, many schools revert to an 80% rule: if 80% of the faculty members are in agreement, then the decision is made and everyone will support the implementation of the decision and do nothing to obstruct it.

Consensus-based decision making thrives when every decision that a school makes is viewed through the lens of shared beliefs and the vision and mission of the school. Consensus always makes sense when the

## A PROVEN SET OF AGREEMENTS

- Be fully present.
- If you wonder, ask. Ask the tough questions.
- Listen for understanding.
- Support one another's learning.
- Speak your truth knowing it is only part of the truth.
- Be mindful of your airtime. Be equitable with it.
- Keep it safe enough to encourage risk taking.
- Take care.
- Start and end on time.
- Give gentle reminders. (We each give any member of the group permission to give us a gentle reminder if any of us stray from these agreements.)



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recommendation is aligned with the aspirations of the school.

The alignment of mission, vision, core beliefs, and the decision-making process is the path of least resistance to whole-school transformation. Consensus-based decision making can lead to the articulation of meaningful and deeply held beliefs, a mission, and a vision for your school.

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## PROPOSED DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

1. We make decisions through consensus.

2. Consensus means that:

- I can live with the decision
- I will support my colleagues in implementing this decision
- I will do absolutely nothing to impede the implementation of this decision.

3. After the faculty members fully explore a proposal, all concerns and questions have been resolved, and it appears that consensus has been reached (using the tuning for consensus protocol), then the facilitator double-checks for consensus by asking:

- Are there any other questions, issues, or concerns regarding this proposal?


If no one speaks, then the facilitator calls for an affirmation of the consensus and everyone says something—such as *So be it, Let it be, Make it so, or Let's do it*—to indicate that a decision has been made.

4. Once consensus is reached on a decision the group will determine:

- What the next steps are, who will take them, and by when
- Who needs to know, who is going to tell them, and by when.

5. If individual members of the group cannot support consensus, they are invited to the next meeting of the presenting group to work through their differences.

6. All decisions and next steps are kept in a notebook that records all decisions made by faculty members.



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